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ABSTRACT

During the last few years, novels, textbooks, basal readers, and the types of questions texts and teachers ask of students have come under attack by individuals and groups espousing several different points of view. Consequently, the International Reading Association (IRA) has passed a resolution recognizing the right and responsibility of parents to monitor their children's education, but opposing policies that deny children access to certain reading materials. The most vicious censorship battles seem to occur when a teacher or principal refuses to listen to a parental complaint and in school districts that do not have clear procedures for dealing with complaints. The best defense against censorship is to form a local group familiar with the strategies of censorship organizations and to initiate a dialogue in order to deal with legitimate complaints. Other strategies include keeping written statements of text selection criteria and course objectives on file, establishing well-publicized complaint procedures, and carefully matching individual students with selected texts. IRA members at state and local levels can also join with other educators to handle censorship attempts effectively and with the educational well-being of students as the primary goal. (HTH)

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The International Reading Association's Role in the Politics of Censorship

by

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A paper presented at the annual convention of the International Reading Association

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At one time the term "censorship" brought to mind titles like Lady Chatterly's Lover and Tropic of Cancer. The issue of censorship was important, but most Reading educators did not find much controversy and community attention focused upon the reading materials they used in their classes.

The times have changed. Print material used in schools has become a symbol and a focus for individuals and groups espousing several different points of view, but each of which hopes to have that particular point of view reflected in the print materials used for the schooling of children. Novels, textbooks, basal readers, approaches to teaching beginning reading, and even the types of questions texts and teachers ask of students have all come under attack during the last few years.

The International Reading Association has recognized the need to make a statement and an organizational stand on the issue of availability of reading material to students. In May of 1980, at the Delegates Assembly of the IRA Annual Convention in St. Louis, the following resolution concerning the "Availability of Reading Material" was passed:

> WHEREAS, the International Reading Association seeks to insure that a continuing concerted effort is made to educate teachers, students and the general public with regard to the interaction between competing values within a society and its governmental guarantees of individual rights and freedoms, and
>
> WHEREAS, the International Reading Association also recognizes the right and responsibility of parents to monitor the education of their own children, be it
>
> RESOLVED, that the International Reading Association supports the efforts of parents to participate in determining the availability of reading materials used to instruct their own children, but be it further

RESOLVED, that the International Reading Association opposes policies which exclude from all students the availability of material for use in reading instruction.

Reading Education Materials Under Attack

State textbook adoption decisions during the past year have been focal points for a good deal of political effort intended to influence text selection. In Texas, committee members were presented with specially prepared "lists of remonstrances" that made objections to various basal series on a page by page basis. Nearly every basal, with the exception of straight decoding approach basals, were attacked with thirty to eighty pages of remonstrances dealing with objections to represented role models, values, teaching techniques, story resolutions, and story topics. Though the remonstrances had only mixed influence at the state level, copies are beginning to appear in hand written form at local levels as the efforts to influence textbook selection continue.

Special interest groups in several states have targeted tradebook and textbook selection as an area of initial confrontation for their groups. One group in Wisconsin has attempted to "permanently check out" offending material from local and school libraries. In North Carolina the state head of a special interest group active in the recent presidential election has listed schools and libraries as areas in need of scrutiny and guidance. California and several other states have experienced the "Evolution vs. Creationism" controversy in the courts and in school board meetings.

It is difficult to determine exactly how much censorship of texts occurs in schools. Edward Jenkinson, author of Censorship in the Classroom (1979), recently estimated that 75% of the individuals who speak to him about censorship difficulties in their schools do not wish to have their names or schools mentioned because of fears about publicity (Jenkinson, 1981). Other

teachers report to Jenkinson a sort of "closet censorship." Department heads, school librarians, and classroom teachers don't use certain texts, order certain books, or teach certain ideas out of a sort of anticipatory paranoia.

During the past year, the American Library Association's Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom has documented a number of cases of censorship and attempted censorship of school reading material. Health, Science, and Biology texts in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Buffalo, New York; Gloucester, Rhode Island, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and the State of Maryland have come under attack for explicit representation of human anatomy. In Waltham, Massachusetts, two pages were sliced from every Biology text because the pages were deemed too specific (NIF, January 1981).

Biology texts are not the only school material to be cited in the Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom. A wide range of titles by Judy Blume have been under attack across the country during the last year. In addition, the Ox-Bow Incident was attacked in Johnson City, Illinois, for its use of profanity and taking God's name in vain (NIF, September 1980). In Continental, California, local church groups succeeded in having Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men removed from school reading lists (NIF, July 1980). Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath was banned in Kanawha, Iowa, and Huxley's Brave New World was banned in Miller, Missouri (NIF, May 1980). In Monroe, Louisiana the school superintendent removed Klein's Naomi in the Middle from the elementary school library after a parental complaint. His comment was, "If a book is objectionable, it is destroyed. It is certainly not our intention to have objectionable materials on our library shelves." (NIF, July 1980).

During the past year, the range of what is objectionable to groups attempting to influence text usage has expanded. Basal reading series using

any approach other than straight decoding have been attacked and found objectionable for not paying proper respect to the Ten Commandments, asking questions that invade student privacy, using slang, and teaching values clarification instead of decoding. Teachers and school districts continue to receive bills of particular or long lists of topics, teaching methods, and learning activities in which the children of the undersigned parents are not to be involved. In Atlanta, Georgia, a group of parents presenting such a list objected to forty texts on the basis of "objectionable views of women, evolution, the supernatural, parental authority, and morality." In particular, the group objected to any material that presented "women as heads of households, too much emphasis on opinion, and no resolution of the moral issue of stealing" (NIF, November 1980, p. 128). In Leyland, Connecticut, the curriculum Man: A Course of Study came under such an attack. As a result the entire six page section describing Eskimos was removed from the sixth grade texts because of objections to a reference to the past Eskimo practice of sharing wives (NIF, January 1981).

What Can Be Done

According to Edward Jenkinson, who has been investigating and writing on the topic of censorship for more than a decade, the most vicious community battles and attacks on schools seem to occur when a teacher or principal refuses to listen to a parental complaint. This can quite easily happen if a school of a district does not have clear procedures for dealing with materials and teaching complaints or if teachers and principals are not highly informed about such procedures. The inappropriate defensive reactions of a single teacher or principal can be costly. Far too many parents are turned into angry foes by non-responsive school personnel and far too many texts are censored by defensive officials who overreact.

Jenkinson (1981) suggests the formation of community based committees or groups to deal with censorship issues. Many censorship attempts in local communities use materials or organizational strategies developed by national organizations. If a community has formed a group of concerned parents, ministers, and community leaders who are informed about the strategies of these organizations, the local committee can carry on a dialogue with the group objecting to school materials. The local group can gather information about the national organizations from Jenkinson's Censorship in the Classroom (1979), the National Council of Teachers of English publication Dealing with Censorship (1979), and the Americal Library Associations's Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom. Such a local group can attend meetings and protests, participate in debates, and identify local ministers who oppose censorship. In short, such a group can create the setting for a community dialogue over legitimate issues. The alternative for communities without such groups is confrontation between schools and parents. Such confrontations offer no advantage and a great deal of harm to the education of children.

There are, in addition, a number of effective strategies that teachers and reading educators can employ at the school and district level. Some of these include:

1. Working with your school to develop and disseminate written policy statements for educational goals and procedures for selecting instructional materials which systematically take into account community concerns and student maturity. Each department should have a written statement of philosophy of what is taught.

2. Working to dispell the idea that only one text can be used in teaching a particular skill or theme.

3. Keeping on file a written selection rationale for frequently used texts.

4. Working to establish a written and well publicized policy to handle complaints concerning texts which places the burden of proof on the accuser and acknowledges the teacher's right to be informed in writing of a complaint, to have the opportunity of a face to face defense with the accuser and to have the right to an advisor or counsel of his/her own choosing. Be sure this policy is fully

discussed along with related issues in inservice sessions with teachers and administrators.

5. Becoming knowledgeable about potential values to students of various types of literature and why they appeal or do not appeal to youth.

6. Working closely with parents and community groups to explain and describe the school reading program by using an active public relations campaign.

7. Using lists of suggested, not required, reading and provide for student choices when developing specific course assignments and objectives.

8. Inviting parents to actively participate in the development and operation of the school reading program in a variety of ways, such as being tutors, or re-evaluators of "objectionable" texts.

9. Carefully matching individual students with selected texts, for a central problem is the use of books which are unsuited for individual students.

10. Providing a variety of materials and books at different readability levels to be used in a classroom.

11. Talking through with students the concept that, though writers are human and express themselves in uniquely different ways, important insights can be gained by looking beyond the specific word choices and writing style. This should be done before assigning new reading materials which may include areas of concern.

12. Developing files of published, professional reviews for the support of materials or texts you choose to use which have been controversial or may raise questions.

13. Asking for clauses in collective bargaining contracts which protect academic or intellectual freedom as well as requiring that agreed on material selection policies and procedures be followed.

14. Working together with other professional education groups to work with local, state, provincial, or regional governmental groups to insure full understanding of relevant issues.

The Role of the International Reading Association

The International Reading Association, in 1978, instituted the Intellectual Freedom Committee as one of its standing committees. That committee has represented the IRA at meetings of the Academic Freedom Group, a coalition of ten professional education groups concerned with censorship related issues.

In addition, the Intellectual Freedom Committee has been involved in:

*Drafting AMICUS (friend of the court) briefs within the framework of the IRA Delegate's Assmebly resolution (May, 1980);

*Participating in state, local, national and international symposia and/or sessions on related issues;

*Investigating, defining and reporting on censorship related issues in bibliographies, articles and other publications; and

*Serving as a clearinghouse for information on speakers, published articles, and related reading education issues at local, state, province, national and international levels.

As important as these activities might be, it seems clear that most of the important decisions and issues related to censorship are going to be decided and resolved at the local level. Closet censors who remove books out of fear need to know that such book removal is undesirable and that they have support at at the local level and community groups need to be formed before controversies polarize school districts. In short, the next step is for IRA members at state and local levels, as has already happened in many states, to join with other educators in organizing to deal with censorship attempts.

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